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Immigrant Women and Domestic Violence: Intersectional Perspectives in a Biographical Context

Nadja Lehmann

This paper presents the material findings of a study submitted as a doctoral thesis with the title '*Immigrant Women in Women's Shelters. Biographical Perspectives of Domestic Violence*' at the Free University of Berlin, Department of Political and Social Science' (Lehmann 2008c). Based on biographical case reconstructions, the study examines how immigrant women seeking support in women's shelters deal with the violence they have experienced. Subsequently the discussion deals with theoretical points of reference for violence research.

Introduction

This work originated from my own professional experience as a social worker in women's shelters, the large share of immigrant women in these shelters and the lack of research in Germany done on immigrant women and domestic violence. Research on immigrant women in shelters or more generally on immigrant women and domestic violence was highlighted in Germany only in 2004 when the first large-scale representative study on violence against women 'Living situation, Safety and Health of Women in Germany' (Schröttle and Müller 2004), followed by the comparative secondary analysis on 'Health and Violence Related Situations of Women With and Without Migration Backgrounds in Germany' (Schröttle and Khelaifat 2008) was published. This explicitly included and raised the question about the extent to which immigrant women were affected by violence. However, there is still a lack of research and in-depth analyses of domestic violence.

The biographical-theoretical study presented here shows how complex biographic linkage of different dimensions of violence and oppression influ-

ence the experience of domestic violence. This paper¹ adopts intersectionality in theoretical and practical approaches to domestic violence and refers to some branches of violence research in the United States, where this theoretical perspective has become more widely utilised. The legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1994) developed the concept of 'intersectionality' based on the situation of 'women of color' affected by domestic violence. The feminist psychologist and academic in the field of violence research, Michele Bograd, explains the fundamental assumptions intersectionality² is based on which are relevant for domestic violence:

... intersectionality suggests that no dimension, such as gender inequality, is privileged as an explanatory construct of domestic violence, and gender inequality itself is modified by its intersection with other systems of power and oppression.(...) While all women are vulnerable to battering, a battered woman may judge herself and be judged by others differently if she is white or black, poor or wealthy, a prostitute or housewife, a citizen or an undocumented immigrant (Bograd 2005: 27).

Domestic violence occurs in individual life stories and is experienced as a personal event. It is, however, at the same time a cultural and social product, which is affected by overlapping links between 'gender', 'ethnicity', 'social class' and other social differences (Feltey in Sokoloff and Dupont 2005: 1). The situation of a large group of immigrant women in shelters affected by violence is characterised to a high degree by the structural circumstances of their migrant status. For most immigrants with a limited residence permit, the step into a women's shelter initially means terminating the violence. At the same time, however, many new problems arise such as, for instance, a less secure residence status, no work permit, restricted opportunities in the labour market, intercultural differences, language difficulties, poor or no medical and psychological support. Migrants affected by domestic violence experience marginalisation, stigmatisation and racism within the violent relationship and through institutional discrimination and also in the shelter community (Aktaş 1993; Lehmann 2001; Glammeier, Müller and Schröttle 2004). They are required to come to terms with perceptions and stereotypes of their 'culture' which are predominant in public discourse, find their place as an individual within it and take a position. Many immigrant women have experienced violence and trauma at various levels (e.g. within the context of migration and seeking refuge), which can only be captured insufficiently by

1 Some extracts of the paper have been published elsewhere (cf. Lehmann 2008a, 2008b, 2006, 2004)

2 The term 'intersectional analysis' resp. 'intersectionality' is meanwhile well-established in German-speaking countries.

terms like 'gender based violence' and 'domestic violence'. These aspects substantially influence the living situations of migrants and, consequently, especially when attempting to deal with difficult stages in life. For staff in women's shelters, the focus of working in the area of counselling immigrant women has gradually shifted.³ Frequently, there are problems which are initially far more pressing and vital to deal with than the experience of domestic violence.

Approach

Based on my professional experience in women's shelters, the research was guided by the following question: What are the effects of the manifold experiences of abused immigrant women during their lifetimes within the context of country of origin, migration and the host country Germany on how they experience domestic violence? To further examine this question it was considered important to gain insight into the subjective points of view and interpretive patterns of abused immigrant women. Thus, how do immigrant women describe their experiences and how do they place and evaluate them? In other words, how do the interviewed women deal with their experiences of violence during their lives?

Between 1999 and 2004, a total of 15 biographical narrative interviews were conducted with immigrant women, who had sought shelter from physical and emotional violence in a women's refuge. These were women who had experienced violence in their relationships with partners from their own countries of origin or with a German origin partner. The women were between 21 and 50 years of age at the time of the interview and were from a number of different geographic as well as educational backgrounds. All the interviewed women had an immigrant background and had come to a women's shelter to escape domestic violence. The analysis took the form of a biographical case reconstruction (Rosenthal 1995; Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997). Biographical research is the appropriate approach for questions of this kind, as here the priorities and points of view of the interviewees are material and the interlocking of social and subjective perspectives are at the centre of the analysis.

The interviews showed that all of the interviewed women discussed and experienced the violence they suffered as a subjectively formidable experi-

3 In 2001, the Intercultural Women's Shelter was opened in Berlin focussing especially on abused immigrant women and their children for conceptional improvements on experiences (Grubic and Lehmann 2003).

ence of marginalisation and oppression. The ways in which the women discussed and/or dealt with violence, however, were complex and differed among individuals, revealing three levels of engagements, which are presented here⁴.

Engagement with violence takes place in a social context

The experience of violence is discussed in this case within the context of experiences of marginalisation and oppression in society, as, for instance, based on gender, ethnic origins, class or other kinds of social inequality. These can refer to either the country of origin or the host country, Germany. This can be illustrated by the case of Mirja Johannsen⁵ a woman from Romania, who belongs to the Roma community.

Case study: Mirja Johannsen

At the time of the interview, Mirja Johannsen and her three children lived in a women's shelter in a big city in Germany and had an unlimited residence permit. Mirja Johannsen was born in Romania in 1961 and belongs to the Roma community. She graduated from school in Romania after year ten, and then took up a job in a factory. Her father and her bad relationship with him are predominant in her accounts of her childhood. Mirja Johannsen recounted, amongst other things, that her father beat her mother. After her marriage, she and her husband spent the first part of their married life in her parent's home. Giving birth to two daughters in quick succession, working hard at a construction site, her unhappy marriage, and a number of self-induced abortions, followed by frequent illness mark this stage in her life in her account. It becomes clear in the interview that being marginalised as Roma significantly influenced the entire family's living situation as well as Mirja Johannsen's future.

4 The resulting interpretations and subsequent hypotheses result from an intricate process of interpretation and analysis and do not exclusively refer to the respective paragraph from the interview presented here. Interpretations and analysis results came about in close exchange and interaction with many persons and groups participating throughout the course of the research process.

5 All names are anonymised.

In 1990, to escape her personal and social situation, for which she could not see a future, Mirja Johannsen and her two daughters illegally fled to Germany as asylum seekers without her family's or her husband's knowledge. She and her two daughters lived in a refugee home and in 1992, her asylum application was turned down and she was requested to leave the country. The deportation warning led her to decide to secure her residence in Germany through marriage. She met a German man and, having overcome some hurdles, they got married as her only option of remaining in Germany was to marry a 'German'. At her own request, she did not live with her husband and, due to her job, she was economically independent from him. It turned out, however, that Mirja Johannsen gradually got emotionally involved in the relationship and in January 1998 had a daughter. She commented on the birth of her daughter as follows: *'In 1998 I had her, and – and then my troubles – my problems so to speak, started, after Elisa was born'*.⁶

The comment that this is when her problems started refers to the fact that, with her emotional involvement, her problems acquired a new dimension. Even before the birth of her daughter, and in her account preceding it, there were grave problems for her as a single mum without any financial or other support that she had to deal with. Mirja had to give up her job after the birth of their daughter, took parental leave and lived on social benefit. When she and her husband went on holiday together, he took her passport off her, and, on their return to Germany, cashed in all the family's benefit, leaving her without any money to live on. Initially, she was only able to feed herself and her three children with an income from giving blood. Mirja sought help from a women's counselling organisation to prevent her benefit money from being paid to her husband. She recounts her experiences with ignorant officers at the social welfare agency in detail, who generally trusted the German husband more, and only after Mirja's repeated requests stopped paying her benefit to him. When she approached the child welfare agency to file for sole custody for her daughter, Mirja reported how he put her under pressure and blackmailed her:

He said: 'I'll show you what I can do, I'm German. I lie and lie and everybody believes what I'm saying.' He only said that, he said: 'Yes, I'll send some foreigners to your home and then they'll knock on your neighbours' doors and they'll ask if this is where Mirja lives and everyone will say you're a whore and then you'll be off home and I'll have Elisa'.

Here the escalation of the relationship's dynamics becomes clear. The conflict of power openly breaks out over the question of custody and the hus-

6 The quotes have been reworked linguistically for this paper, without changing their meaning.

band plays on his claim to power as a German. He tries to offend her by stigmatising her sexual morals by way of her ethnic origins, thus referring to dominant images in the public discourse.

Tearfully she describes one weekend, he turned up with the police on her doorstep, brandishing a decision on the determination of physical custody of their daughter and took the girl away, even though she was still breastfeeding at the time. He called Mirja a 'gypsy' and 'Romanian', who neglected her child and wanted to abduct the child to Romania. Only after some days and with difficulty, she was able to obtain another decision and get her daughter back. After that, Mirja decided to seek shelter in a women's refuge with her daughters:

Because I was scared, because I thought 'Goodness, he is German, he lies and everybody believes him', he was able to do that and then I thought 'okay then, I'll go to the shelter until there's a decision on what I can do'. Then I came here, he wrote a couple of applications, saying I was a gypsy (with a gasp) he was afraid for Elisa, because I don't take care of her; he's better, he's good; he is! (ironically) Well, now I'm here at the shelter, (drawing her breath).

Given this reality, Mirja Johannsen saw only one option for herself which was to go to the shelter in order to find support there in her dispute with her husband, which had become a legal one.

Summary

What is relevant in the analysis of the entire interview is Mirja Johannsen's perspective as a member of a minority community in her country of origin, where she's experienced a tradition of discrimination. The menace of her husband, who played on his status as a German in their relationship by making it clear that she did not stand a chance against a German, when, for instance, fighting for the custody of a child, because nobody would believe her, the 'gypsy', anyway, is predominant in her individual experience of violence and is inseparably tied to her experiences of discrimination as a Roma in her Romanian society of origin. Throughout the interview, it becomes clear what role historic ethnicised and discriminating discourses about Roma in the Romanian society of origin, as well as discourses about Romanian Roma in Germany effective at the time of her immigration, play in how she experienced violence during her relationship with a German.

Engagement within the context of experiences in the family of birth

Women in this group deal with their experiences of violence within the context of their families of birth. This social context is blanked out of their biographies and described only on further enquiry and is immaterial for the individual way of dealing with violent behaviour. The story of Nihad Amin, a woman from Iraqi Kurdistan serves as an example.

Case study Nihad Amin

At the time of the interview, Ms Amin and her two sons lived in a sheltered flat belonging to a women's refuge in a big city in Germany. Nihad Amin was born in 1972 as a family's fourth daughter and fifth child in Iraqi Kurdistan. Her relationship with her mother plays a prominent role in Nihad's later life and in the context of her violent experiences, which is why her family background is of such importance in this case. Her mother gave birth to a total of 12 children, 3 sons and 9 daughters, every one to two years up until 1983. At Nihad's birth, her mother was in her early twenties and had already given birth to seven children⁷. It is Nihad Amin's impression that her mother did not give the same amount of love to all her children. This is reflected retrospectively in the following paragraph of Nihad Amin's interview on the mother's relationship with her children:

Because there were so many of us, that's why she couldn't give her love to all of us. She only likes my older brother and my older sister, and all the others she doesn't care about, and my little sister, she likes her, yes, and all the others are all the same to her.

Generally speaking, it is not unusual in the Iraqi Kurdish society to have twelve children. The interview with Nihad, however, shows that this social norm does not lead to her having any specific expectations of her mother. She experiences her mother's attitude towards her as indifferent and hostile, and this is an experience that materially influences her in later life. Nihad's father, a communist, was politically persecuted, something that affected the entire family. He died of cancer, having been degraded from a teacher and headmaster to work as a train conductor, subject to political arbitrariness and various imprisonments. After his death, the children and their mother lived

7 Two sons had already died.

together under difficult economic circumstances. The mother wanted Nihad Amin to marry and not to study or get vocational training.

My mother, she wasn't so educated. She's from a village, she didn't know anything. She never understood what learning was and she always kept saying we must all stop learning. I've got many brothers and sisters and I just carried on. I always enjoyed learning and she kept saying that's not important. 'Getting married is more important than learning, and if you were a teacher or something, you wouldn't get good wages, so it's useless. Getting married is the best thing for women' and I wanted to finish high school. She said, no I must marry now, that is not so important. This caused many problems with my brothers and sisters and my mother. Especially, I never understood her. I don't like her at all. And sometimes, when I think about it, I hate my mother, because of this, feeling. I still want to learn, but I haven't got the opportunity. Yes, and I did graduate from high school and she said, I wasn't allowed to study and go to college.

Ms Amin got married in 1995 in Iraqi Kurdistan to a man 20 years her senior, who had been living in Germany for 18 years, had a German passport, and was of Iraqi Kurdish origins. They got engaged in 1994 when he was on a visit to Iraqi Kurdistan and after the wedding she came to Germany with him in 1995. Nihad Amin told us that she married her husband out of 'spite', because her mother was no longer willing to accept her repeated rejection of marriage candidates and also because her husband-to-be came from Europe and had promised her that once they were married she would be allowed to learn in Germany. She made it clear that she did not marry for love and that her mother had pushed her to choose a husband. Still, she held on to her original aim of 'learning'. She then described the disappointing experiences during the early years of her marriage and shows how inadequate and wrong the decision was, something which her mother had pushed her into taking. Her husband kept putting her off to start with and then rejected her desire to learn: *'And then it started so (...) that I wanted to study and so on, because he was so, he had a complex. He wants me to be only the wife, at home like my mother. He was just like my mother. And then I noticed, my husband, he is just like my mother'*.

They had two sons together, who were born in 1996 and 1997 in Germany. Ms Amin had been severely abused and raped by her husband since 1998. In 2001, with the support of the child welfare agency, she found refuge in a women's shelter with adjoining sheltered flats, where she lived in her own flat with her children.

Summary

Nihad Amin has had to deal with her violent experiences in the context of her family history. For Ms Amin, her experience of her relationship with her husband was like a re-enactment of her family history. The husband, who is supposed to love her, does not feel any love for her and wants to keep her from learning and from growing as a person. Also her mother, who should have loved her, did not do so and wanted to keep Nihad from learning and growing. Her negative experiences with her husband acquired a specific meaning through this parallel. She did not discuss her experiences of severe abuse during marriage in the 'context of gender'. She rather equated her husband's behaviour towards her with her mother's behaviour towards her by using the phrase *'My husband is like my mother'*. All other contexts, e.g. her mother's oppression as an 'uneducated' woman in her father's family or her family's situation of political persecution influencing her life in so many ways, are not seen by her in the context of her experience of violence. The evaluation of the interview shows in detail that the reason for this is to be sought in her own emotionally damaged relationship with her mother, whom she blames for her own fate.

Engagement within a biographical context as a singular experience is made

Within this group of women, the experienced violence is not presented in a way that is connected with their own biographies. Only on enquiry and within the context of the entire interview, it becomes clear that describing the experienced violence as fate and as a singular experience is an important way for the interviewees to distance themselves from it. An example of this is the third reconstructed individual case, that of Ella Noack from Poland.

Case study Ella Noack

Ella Noack was born in 1954 in Poland and immigrated to Germany in 1988 with her daughter from her first marriage to live with her German boyfriend. She married him after a few months and then lived for eleven years in Germany with her husband, daughter and stepson. After that, she spent some time in a women's refuge and afterwards in sheltered housing. By then she had received German citizenship, got a divorce and has her own flat. In her

interview, Ella Noack discussed the violence she experienced at first as the central dramatic stage of her life, which is merely framed by the rest of her life. The violent experience is not set in relation to other experiences during her life, i.e., there is no biographical continuity and no connections with her family's history. Intensive questioning, however, and the evaluation of the entire interview show that there are pronounced continuities and many aggravating experiences in her life, which stand in close topical and emotional relation to the experience of violence, which I demonstrate by way of some examples.

Ella Noack was born in Poland in 1954 in a town of approximately 15,000 inhabitants. She was the first child of a newly wed couple. At the time of Ella's birth, her father was about 20 years of age and worked as an electrician for a radio station. Her mother was about 22 years old when Ella was born and worked in a clothes factory. Both parents had grown up in villages and moved to the town from different areas of Poland. Ella's parents grew up during the war and both became part of the large internal migration surge from rural areas to the towns and cities during the phase of industrialisation from 1945 to 1964. Her parents separated when Ella was two years old. From that moment onwards, Ella had no contact with her father. Ella's mother said that the reason for their separation was violence from Ella's father. Ella Noack at first did not indicate the reason for separation as 'battering' during her interview and thus avoided the perspective of her mother being victimised by her father's violent behaviour. This omission is also significant in respect to her later first hand experiences with violence perpetrated by her own husband. As becomes clear in the evaluation, she avoids looking at the parallels between her mother's life and her own. Obviously, there is the possibility that Ella Noack simply did not have the capacity to realise and reflect these relations. She does, however, prove to be able to analyse and construct relations in her family's history with regard to her mother's experiences.

After her parents' separation, Ella and her mother lived together in a small town. Ella describes her mother as a devout Catholic. Ella's mother later joined the Jehovah's Witnesses and turned away from the Catholic Church. Ella Noack tells us that her mother as an outsider had always felt a 'stranger' in the small town she had moved to and that she was isolated. Her mother suffered from depression and delusions and at times was not capable of looking after her daughter. She was hospitalised for her mental problems a number of times. According to Ella Noack, the reasons for her mother's mental illness are to be sought in her childhood. Ella's mother lost her own mother at the age of seven. Straight after the death of Ella Noack's grandmother, the war began and, according to her account in the interview, the

family had to leave their farm because of the Germans. Ella Noack describes her mother's situation with empathy:

Yes, that's difficult, that is, at seven you're a youngster, (...) so it wasn't nice for her, no, so that was no good time for my mummy (...) yeah well and, she was ill as well, she was in hospital, she needed quiet, psychological quiet she needed, you know, the events – her mother's death, probably, and the war and everything, they wore her out, I think the two sisters they were tougher than my mother, psychologically I mean, you know what I mean, my mummy is weaker, YEAA.

Ella Noack constructs biographical contexts between events that happened when her mother was growing up and the particular problems that her mother had as an adult. She, therefore, offers a biographical family perspective on her own life. It becomes clear that she has very close emotional ties with her mother. Their relationship is, however, marked by a strong ambivalence. It can be assumed that this is due to the fact that her mother had serious psychological problems. Ella Noack shows, during the interview, how she attempted to distance herself from her mother's life at different levels, without becoming disloyal.

She was happy she had me, she had a task then, she always told me she loved me more than anything and still and she said 'I didn't want to get married then, I didn't want a man to hurt you or something', no, and I'm a little different from my mummy there (laughs) must be like my father.

Here, an aspect of Ella's conflict of loyalty becomes clear. Here as well as in other parts of the interview, there is an indication of her fear of becoming like her mother. For her, this is even more threatening, as there are many parallel developments in her life when compared to her mother's. For instance, Ella Noack's first marriage, just like her mother's, failed early on and she as well was then a single mother with a little girl. Like her mother, she remarried when her daughter was a little older and experienced domestic violence. Apart from these obvious parallels, there are also numerous differences, as Ella Noack, for instance, is far better educated and has higher vocational qualifications. On the other hand, children of mentally ill parents often are afraid of falling ill themselves and this fear can become very important in their later lives. For Ella Noack, it is a psychological way out to secretly hope that she is more like her father.

What becomes very clear is Ella Noack's strong desire to belong and to have a family, which dominates her life story and relates back to her family history. This is also how to interpret her long lasting violent relationship because of which she then had to turn to a women's refuge. Enormous personal efforts and repressing this past must have been necessary to make this relationship and a family possible at all. The relationship with her German hus-

band-to-be was marked by disappointments and negative experiences from the outset and still she decided to give up her economically independent life in Poland. She and her daughter, for years, lived in a family situation characterised by fear and violence. Her desire to emigrate was clearly coupled with her desire for a family. This is also demonstrated by the fact that Ella Noack did not break out of her marriage even when she held a residence status of her own and even a German passport at a later point. She stayed and the more threatening and violent the situation at home became, the more desperately she fought for keeping her values and her image of a happy family life. She now accepts the reality of her failed dream. At the same time, however, she strives not to regard this as her personal failure and defeat.

Summary

Blanking out family history and biographical continuities, in Ella Noack's case, illustrates her fear of her life being predetermined by her mother's 'heritage' and her own biographical failure therefore being inevitable. Ella Noack is the daughter of a woman traumatised by her wartime experiences, shamed in her religious values by her divorce and stigmatised and isolated by her mental illness and who suffered the consequential social and communal marginalisation of post-war Poland. Avoiding a biographical perspective, therefore, can be interpreted as an important strategy for Ella Noack to deal with her violent experiences. In this way, she can develop new perspectives for her future and she fights for giving her life some positive meaning. Yet she only succeeds in this by mustering up enormous psychological strength for repressing this past. This strategy of reframing situations and applying a positive meaning to them has also led to Ella Noack remaining, for many years of her life, in a violent relationship and not being able to protect herself, her daughter and her husband's son from it.

Conclusion

A material outcome of the study is to show that the various levels of discussing the experiences of violence are related in a manifest or latent way to the biographical experience of marginalisation and oppression in the context of society and family of birth. These experiences, along with family and social discourses related with it, structure the discussion *as well as* the actual experiences of violence. The subjective points of view and interpretive pat-

terns of the interviewed immigrant women have objective and real consequences because they substantially influence their actions and perceptions⁸. The analysis of the interviews shows that the applicable gender contexts do not necessarily become significant points of reference for dealing with the experiences of violence, notwithstanding the fact that all these women were in a women's shelter, where this point of view on domestic violence predominates. On the contrary, for the interviewed women, the injuries deriving from mother-daughter relationships or the experience of discrimination in the countries of origin or the host country play prominent roles.

The violence experiences are the point from which the presented biographical self-portraits take their structure. In the interviews, domestic violence is categorised as a severe experience of oppression and 'crisis of belonging'. This is what connects it to migration, a background experience common to all of the women. For all the interviewed immigrant women, migration is the common direct link with the history of the abusive relationships. Also migration specific circumstances such as, for instance, social isolation, residence status or experiences of racism constitute dynamics in the intimate partner relationships. Migration generally requires a redefinition of belonging. Still, this does not mean that old feelings of belonging are given up at the same time. The meaning of migration strongly depends on the context. It is a symbol of belonging, but not of the crisis itself. Consequently, migration can be constructed as a relevant but unspecific biographical context.

The discussion of the experiences of violence in this context can be classed as dealing with 'belonging' at various levels. Where does in/exclusion take place? Where does marginalisation take place? Where does oppression take place? Where is 'belonging' called into question? Where is it desired particularly strongly? What importance do the interviewed women award these types of dealing with the violence experienced? The different ways of discussing this can be termed 'biographical work' (Fischer-Rosenthal 1995), that is strategies for dealing with violence in a biographical context. Biographical narratives are a way of dealing with and working on hurtful and traumatic events. This also has an important social function. By telling stories, we create and express social belonging. As every person belongs to numerous social groups – women, migrants, Kurds, residents at a women's shelter, mothers – the question arises, what category or position is perceived in what discursive situation. These categorisations, positions and their discussions reflect power relations in society. The narrative offers an opportu-

8 This is a basis of philosophy of science for biography research and/or interpretative social studies.

nity to come to terms with negative categorisations, for example, with verbal humiliation in a violent relationship, but also with other attributions like negative stereotypes and discriminating discourses. Stereotypes can be rejected in such a way or it is possible to retroactively defend oneself against situations, where the person was wronged (Czyzewsky 1995). Such narratives about 'belonging' also show how we position ourselves in terms of differential categories like, for instance, gender, ethnicity and class (Anthias 2003: 22). For counselling and support work this would mean that focussing exclusively on gender, the migrant status or the applicable culture for defining problems of domestic violence can result in not perceiving the complexity of experiences and the subsequent problem solving strategies of women affected by violence. These, on the other hand, may be very important resources as the needs of battered women in general vary individually as do their requirements for support.

Theoretical integration and discussion

The biographical study presented here points to the relevance of social and family contexts for the experience of domestic violence. It showed that discussions and experiences of violence must not only be considered within the context of gender but that other differential power structures pervade them and they are, therefore, 'intersectionally' structured (Crenshaw 1994; Rommelspacher 2006). This means that the category 'gender' does not have an isolated effect within the biographical context but as a contextualised category. This perspective is not only relevant for abused immigrant women but it focuses on the heterogeneity and diversity of all women experiencing violence at home. It is, therefore, only consistent for the American psychologist, author and experienced violence researcher, Mary Ann Dutton (1996) to point out that violence research requires multi-dimensional models. Comprehensive context analyses need to systematically take into account social, ethnic and cultural contexts, the life story, networks and especially the individual perspectives of abused women (ibid.: 111). The results of my work are in line with a quote by Mary Ann Dutton, who summarises the requirements of future theoretical research and practical approaches to domestic violence as follows:

The next decade of work with battered women is compelled to address the real complexity and diversity of battered women's experience – across women who vary from each other according to race, ethnicity, social class, age, sexual preference, and physical ablebodiedness. Social context analysis is one tool easily accessible for the task (Dutton 1996: 123).

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